

PUSONG NAGLALAKBAY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FILIPINO ECE TEACHERS WORKING OVERSEAS

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Abstract

There is a huge migration of Filipino early childhood education (ECE) teachers working abroad. Thus, this study explored the lived experiences of Filipino Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers working abroad, focusing on how they adapt personally and professionally in foreign educational settings. Drawing on Acculturation Theory, the research aimed to understand the behavioral, identity, and value changes experienced by these teachers. Using a phenomenological qualitative design, five Filipino ECE teachers from diverse countries participated in in-depth interviews. Findings revealed significant changes in behavior, including professional flexibility and assertive communication, alongside evolving teacher identities marked by self-reliance and a global perspective. Additionally, shifts in values such as increased appreciation for diversity, mental well-being, and family collaboration were observed. These outcomes underscore the transformative impact of cross-cultural teaching on Filipino educators' professional growth and personal development. The study concludes that working abroad fosters cultural competence, resilience, and reflective teaching practices among Filipino ECE teachers. Future research should examine the long-term effects of these experiences on professional growth and well-being, and educational institutions should develop support programs to enhance cultural adaptation and emotional resilience for overseas teachers.

Keywords: Acculturation Theory; Filipino ECE teachers; Lived experiences; Cultural adaptation; Professional growth

1. INTRODUCTION

As teachers continue to seek teaching opportunities outside their home countries, the dynamics of global education migration have been gradually changing. (Cahilog, Sarong, & Arcilla Jr., 2023).

Schools in places like South Africa are losing experienced and skilled teachers each year because many are moving to other countries for work. This growing trend has caused genuine concern for the education system there (Mahamed, Dasoo, & Israel, 2024). The same thing is happening in the Philippines. Many teachers under the Department of Education have left to teach overseas, hoping for a brighter future (Waban & Elbanbuena, 2024).

If this trend continues, it may lead to a shortage of capable teachers in local schools, especially in areas that already lack resources. Finding and retaining well-trained, passionate teachers becomes increasingly difficult (Soriano, Nabor-Ferrer & Ferrer, 2024). Therefore, it is essential to listen to the stories of those who made the significant decision to leave home, their families, and everything familiar behind. Through their stories, it seeks to understand their emotions, motivations, and the challenges they face in choosing a life far from home. It also aims to highlight the heart behind their decision—the *pusong naglalakbay*—that continues to guide them in their teaching journey, no matter where they are.

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of Overseas Filipino Early Childhood Teachers. It aims to understand the lived experiences, emotions, and sacrifices of Filipino ECE teachers working abroad, far from their families. By hearing their stories, we can highlight their dedication and hard work. The findings can guide aspiring Filipino teachers, inform foreign employers on how to support them better, and help government agencies create programs for their well-being. Most of all, it honors the heart (*puso*) and strength of these teachers. teachers who continue to care for young learners, even when they are away from home.

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Filipino Early Childhood Teachers working overseas. This research is anchored upon Acculturation Theory. This theory states the process by which individuals or groups from one culture come into contact with and adopt elements of another culture (Berry, 2005).

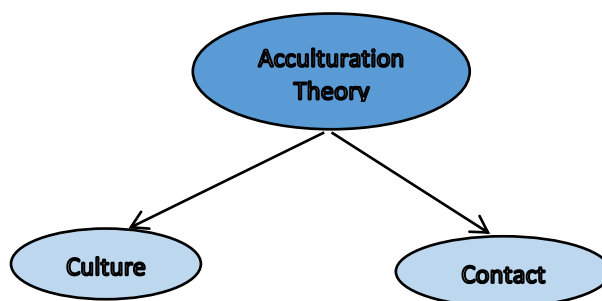


Figure 1. Paradigm

2. METHOD

This study used a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. According to Ali, Al Hatef, and Alamri (2024), qualitative research collects non-numerical data to understand human behavior, attitudes, and beliefs. Phenomenology helps in understanding thought processes by focusing on how individuals perceive and experience the world around them (Xotamovna, 2024). This approach is key to understanding the lived experiences, emotions, challenges, and cultural adaptations of Filipino Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers abroad, examining how they balance personal and professional life while preserving their Filipino identity.

The study focused on Filipino ECE teachers in New Zealand, Canada, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Thailand. These countries were chosen for their large Filipino communities and diverse education systems. Each offers unique challenges and opportunities, from New Zealand's inclusive approach to Canada's large diaspora, Uzbekistan's evolving system, Vietnam's growth, and Thailand's blend of tradition and modernity. These contexts help understand how Filipino teachers adapt while maintaining cultural roots.

Purposive sampling was used to select five participants with at least one year of overseas teaching experience, excluding those with less. If necessary, replacements with similar profiles would be recruited. This method is commonly used in research across various paradigms, as it helps ensure a quality sample is selected without bias, thereby increasing the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings and ensuring alignment with the study's objectives (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). According to Creswell & Poth (2016), 3 to 25 participants are appropriate for phenomenological studies, making five sufficient. Data were gathered through a validated, researcher-made semi-structured interview guide and in-depth interviews.

Data collection began with informed consent, ensuring participants understood the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and rights. Interviews and questionnaires were scheduled at convenient times. Data, including transcripts, were anonymized and securely stored. Using phenomenological analysis, researchers explored the participants' lived experiences, with member checking to confirm accuracy. The findings offer insights into the challenges and rewards of teaching abroad for Filipino educators.

Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, data security, minimizing harm, respect for participants, beneficence, justice, and transparency. Participants could withdraw anytime without penalty. Personal information was protected through anonymization and secure storage. The study was conducted honestly, ensuring accurate and ethical reporting of findings.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility involved multiple data methods and member checking to validate findings. Transferability was supported by rich descriptions for applicability. Dependability was ensured through detailed documentation for consistency. Confirmability was achieved by basing conclusions on participant data rather than researcher bias.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of participants' description revealed prominent themes derived from the experiences shared by Filipino teachers engaged in foreign teaching. This theme encompassed lived experiences of Filipino teachers working abroad.



Figure 2. Modified Paradigm

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Emerging Themes
Change in Behavior	Adaptation to Systems Adoption of New Techniques Learning from Colleagues	Professional Flexibility Assertive Communication Peer Mentorship
Change in Identity	Evolving Teacher Identity Self-Reliance Global Perspective	Empowered Professional Identity Transnationalism Rediscovered Purpose
Change in Values	Valuing Diversity Renewed Family Collaboration Mental Well-Being Focus	Cultural Humility Connection over Compliance Mindful Teaching/Living

Theme 1: Change in Behavior

When delving into the realm of individuals in contact who hail from diverse cultures, we found ourselves captivated by the intricate tapestry of human experiences and interaction. It's a domain where the boundaries of identity blur, and the richness of cultural diversity unfolds in myriad ways. Teachers working abroad often find themselves at the crossroads of adaptation and resilience. Filipino Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers, in particular, often encounter a complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and contextual challenges.

Filipino educators working in foreign educational systems must navigate unfamiliar disciplinary norms and integrate into new cultural and educational frameworks

One of the most common experiences shared by Filipino ECE teachers working abroad is an initial sense of being overwhelmed. They often face the challenge of meeting strict licensing requirements, adapting to detailed documentation practices, and learning to communicate confidently in a professional setting that values assertiveness.

Participant 1 shared:

"At first, it felt overwhelming—navigating licensing requirements, learning to document every observation, and expressing myself confidently in a professional environment that expects assertiveness."

Filipino educators effectively blend traditional and modern strategies to enhance student engagement and learning. They also prioritize relationship-building and motivation to bridge cross-cultural gaps.

Participant 3 shared:

"I've tried to blend what I know from the Philippines with the structure of the local curriculum. I use PowerPoint presentations, play-based learning, online games, and real-life examples to make lessons more engaging and relatable... I also apply positive reinforcement strategies, such as giving prizes at the end of the month to the winning team, calling students by their first names to build rapport, and writing personalized notes to encourage them."

This statement illustrates how Filipino educators customize their approach to meet international standards while maintaining cultural relevance.

Filipino educators abroad frequently adapt through active observation and peer collaboration.

Participant 4 shared:

"To adapt, I first took time to observe and listen to the local teachers on how they do it. I was lucky to have coordinators and co-teachers who supported my adjustment... I've learned to be more open and flexible with how I deliver content, especially when language and cultural dynamics are different."

Theme 2: Change in Identity

As researchers, we were drawn to the nuanced dynamics at play when individuals from different cultural backgrounds intersect. Teachers from the Philippines working abroad often experience transformation not only in their professional practices but also in their self-concept and sense of purpose.

Working abroad significantly shapes both personal growth and professional development. Navigating cultural, emotional, and social environments leads to greater independence and reflection.

Participant 4 shared:

“Professionally, I gained so much. Teaching in a different country made me realize that being an effective teacher means knowing how to adapt... I became more confident in using technology and planning interactive lessons... Most importantly, working abroad gave me back the sense of purpose I was starting to lose when I was overloaded with paperwork in the Philippines. Here, I feel like I’m really teaching—not just surviving.”

Participant shared:

“On a personal level, I’ve become more independent and self-reliant... There are days I miss home a lot, but I learned how to handle that loneliness in a healthy way—by staying busy, attending online church, or just taking time to rest... That gave me clarity on what I want in life—not just career-wise, but also personally.”

Participant 2 shared:

“Living and teaching abroad has been a mix of adjustment, learning, and personal growth... Being abroad challenged me to improve not just in teaching, but in the way I see myself and my purpose.”

Theme 3: Change in Values

The journey of Filipino ECE teachers abroad fosters not only behavioral and identity shifts but also a reevaluation of core values and worldviews. Working overseas provides educators with opportunities to learn from cultural diversity and adjust their approaches accordingly.

Participant 5 shared:

“Broadens my understanding about ECE and how big the sector is... Also, it gave me opportunity to learn about different cultures and challenge myself to adjust my learning ability based on their culture.”

Participant 3 also mentioned:

“These approaches have helped me create a more inclusive and motivating learning environment that supports both language development and student engagement.”

Filipino educators have developed a deeper understanding of family involvement and its positive impact on student development.

Participant 5 shared:

“It enhances as well my collaboration with the family to help them be involved in their child’s learning.”

Exposure to different cultural work ethics and lifestyles abroad leads many Filipino teachers to reassess their priorities and value self-care.

Participant 4 shared:

"I also started valuing quiet time and peace more. Back home, I was always surrounded by people or caught up in work. Here, I've had the chance to slow down and reflect."

4. DISCUSSIONS

The Theme 1 emphasized that ECE teachers working abroad face behavioral changes due to cultural differences, language barriers, and professional demands. Alicamen and Becamon (2022) highlight challenges like unfamiliar teaching methods and strict requirements that call for adaptability. Over time, teachers blend practices with local approaches, using customized materials and cultural competence (Dizon & Nanquil, 2024). Observation and collaboration also help them adjust to diverse classrooms (Apao & Naparan, 2024).

Beyond behavioral changes, Theme 2 showed that Filipino ECE teachers abroad experience deep personal and professional identity shifts, gaining self-reflection, confidence, and renewed purpose. Garcia (2019) highlights how these experiences boost intercultural competence and reflective teaching. Teachers also build independence and emotional resilience, reshaping their self-view and goals, blending Filipino roots with host country values to redefine their global educational roles.

In Theme 3, teaching abroad leads Filipino educators to reassess their values, fostering inclusivity, collaboration, and emotional well-being. Pacala (2024) notes that they deepen their global education understanding and strengthen family and community ties. Exposure to diverse cultures helps them adapt teaching strategies and promote inclusive learning. They also prioritize family involvement and personal well-being, reflecting on a more balanced lifestyle, showing the transformative impact of cross-cultural teaching on their values.

5. CONCLUSION

Filipino ECE teachers abroad experience behavioral, identity and values changes caused by cultural, language, and professional challenges. They adapt by blending Filipino and local practices, developing cultural competence and collaboration skills. This experience boosts their confidence, resilience, and reflective teaching, reshaping their global professional identity. Teaching abroad also promotes inclusivity, well-being, and stronger family and community ties, highlighting a transformative impact on their values and practices.

6. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that future research examine the long-term impact of cross-cultural teaching on Filipino ECE teachers' professional growth and well-being. Educational institutions and host countries should provide support programs that promote cultural competence, emotional resilience, and inclusive teaching strategies. Regular opportunities for collaboration and reflection can help teachers better navigate diverse classrooms. Furthermore, integrating family and community involvement into teaching practices can strengthen educators' connection to their cultural roots while enhancing student learning outcomes.

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